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Defense and No Apologies From Author of Fiscal Bill

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Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Representative David R. Obey, at work Monday in Washington, a leader behind an \$825 billion stimulus package in the House. "You have to take into account the fact that there are certain people in this society getting crushed by this economy," Mr. Obey said.

WASHINGTON - When House Republicans look at the \$825 billion economic package headed toward a vote this week, they do not see President Obama. To them, the bill personifies Representative David R. Obey, the prickly Wisconsin Democrat who is chairman of the Appropriations Committee and has spent 40 years in Congress as a champion of federal spending.

Included in the package is \$30 billion to subsidize health insurance for those who lose their jobs, \$20 billion to accelerate new health care information technology, \$1 billion to renovate community health centers, \$600 million to train health care workers, \$15 billion to increase college Pell Grants and \$4 billion to help communities buy and improve distressed properties.

Indeed, it was Mr. Obey, the third-most-senior member of the House, who, in large measure, shaped the bill, in concert with other House Democratic leaders. And though Mr. Obama has

embraced the bill, not a single House Republican has lent it support. The president himself is scheduled to visit Capitol Hill on Tuesday to try to address Republican concerns that Mr. Obey and others are using the legislation to push vast amounts of money into health care and other favored initiatives.

"It is pretty obvious we are funding the chairman's priorities," said Representative Jerry Lewis of California, the senior Republican on the appropriations panel. Mr. Lewis described Mr. Obey as driven by a "pent-up desire to spend money in existing programs."

But the plan is expected to pass with or without Republican support, and Mr. Obey makes no apologies for its contents. An essential part of responding to any economic crisis, he said, is looking out for those on the receiving end of the turmoil.

"You have to take into account the fact that there are certain people in this society getting crushed by this economy," said Mr. Obey, whose work on the package left him worn down and struggling to regain his voice. "They lose their jobs, they lose their health insurance, they lose their ability to keep their kids in college.

"If you didn't have two million additional people out of work, you wouldn't have to be looking for ways to help them. What the hell do you do if the economy goes to hell and two or three or four million more people are out of work?"

Representative Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin, the senior Republican on the Budget Committee, sees it differently. "This is 1936 economics," Mr. Ryan said. "But it reflects David's ideology and his economic doctrine. They took everything in their file cabinet that has been piling up for 100 years, threw it in this bill and called it economic stimulus."

Mr. Obey, 70, the product of a Catholic blue-collar upbringing in Wausau, said that if he had sole ownership, he would have turned out a costlier measure with more health spending. He said his role was to fashion a package that could balance the competing interests and ideas of a range of lawmakers, the new administration and outside groups, and roll it into a bill that could pass - and lift the economy.

"This is my honest effort," he said, "to find a point of equilibrium where a majority of people in the place can feel comfortable with what we have done, and then you hope it works."

It is just the latest in a series of big spending bills overseen by Mr. Obey, who has been at the center of Congressional money wars for decades since his election in 1969.

The bearded and bespectacled Mr. Obey is often seen racing between his office in the Capitol and the House floor just steps away. Friends say they gauge his mood by the number of sharpened No. 2 pencils stuck in his pocket: the higher the number, the more caution to use when approaching.

"David is tough and doesn't suffer fools lightly," said Representative Rosa DeLauro, Democrat of Connecticut, a longtime colleague who credits him with a "masterful job" in putting the plan together. "He was given a mission, and there wasn't anybody else who would put in the time, the energy and the effort to meet the demands everyone had on him."

Mr. Obey's impatience, temper and occasionally cutting tone are well known. Even as he outlined the economic plan before Mr. Obama's inauguration, he flippantly referred to the new president as "the crown prince." The remark was evidence that Mr. Obey, like other veteran chairmen involved in writing the stimulus package, might not be entirely deferential to the new president until he proved he could exert his influence.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California placed Mr. Obey in charge of producing the economic measure and shares his view that the spending for health, nutrition and unemployment programs is justified and a quicker way than tax breaks to pump money into the economy. Ms. Pelosi is very loyal to the chairman, who was a top ally in her 2001 race for Democratic whip.

Putting the economic bill together turned out to be challenging. Mr. Obey and a contingent of Democratic staff members worked over the holidays, meeting with other lawmakers. They were in talks with Rahm Emanuel, who was soon to be the White House chief of staff, and Rob

Nabors, a former staff director of the Appropriations Committee who had left to join the Obama team as a budget official.

"I virtually have done nothing else but this since November," Mr. Obey said.

As the deadline for delivering a bill neared, the effort went well into the night. Mr. Obey told reporters that he informed fellow Democrats who raised questions about the bill in a private meeting that they had to take into consideration that it was finished at 4 a.m. after four martinis - a crack he quickly clarified as a joke.

One top Democratic official acknowledged privately there was some frustration that the legislation was being used to push money into favored Democratic programs. But the official said that that was a small element of the overall measure and that existing programs were the most efficient way to distribute money quickly.

While Republicans are shaking their heads at the 647-page bill, Mr. Obey said the legislation met Mr. Obama's goals of renewing consumer buying power through job creation, aiding those most severely hit by the downturn and transforming the economy.

"With all due respect," he said, addressing his critics, "I would say the vast majority of the Congress, the new White House and the vast majority of the country will favor this package or something very close to it."